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RELEASED TIME

Pausing with the textbooks to go study the Good Book

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He said he's sponsoring the bill because he thinks some districts and members of the public are confused about whether released-time is allowed. He generally believes released-time programs are positive.

Since it's one of the state's largest released-time program, LifeWise is getting all the attention. But Click said he wants to increase access to released time to children of all faiths.

Ohio's released-time policy isn't meant to favor Christians, Click said. Districts that allow released time are not allowed to pick and choose which sect gets to offer off-campus religious instruction.

"Some people act like it's only about Christianity, it's not," Click said. "Muslims can do it. Hindus can do it. It's not a particular brand or Christianity. It could be evangelicals, it could be Catholics. It could be Mormons. All we're saying is the school should make a policy so they can organize appropriately."

Critics of LifeWise, however, note that it tends to be the largest faith organizations that can organize and raise money to create a released-time program.

Ohio law requires parents or guardians to give their written consent for a student to take released time.

Click noted that students are not allowed under the law to ditch school to go to LifeWise during core subjects, such as math, English-language arts, science or social studies.

"We're not telling the school what the policy has to be, we're just saying have a policy," he said. "We're not taking control away from the school."

Comer said that LifeWise programs tend to be offered during lunch or non-core subjects, such as physical education, music, art or technology and library times. Yet Comer and many other parents believe those are important classes, too, and students' education can lag if they miss them.

For instance, during library and technology class, students are "supposed to learn how to research stuff, how to use computers, the value of how the library is structured," Comer said.

Click, who is a pastor outside of his job in the Ohio House, is not too worried about the non-core subjects that students may miss for released time.

"I'm worried they're missing out on religion, not just education," he said.

WHOSE VERSION OF CHRISTIANITY?

Although LifeWise tries to avoid wading into doctrinal and theological intricacies that divide Christian churches, it teaches that homosexuality is a sin and God created people as man and woman, no matter how confused someone may be about their gender identity, according to a LifeWise document posted onto Comer's website called "Different Questions from Students" that is to help people working in LifeWise academies.

"All sin angers Him and makes Him sad. God wants us to turn away from sin and do what is right," the document says, citing a handful of scripture passages it believes backs these beliefs.

Penton said LifeWise's views are fairly typical among Christians.

These beliefs are concerning, said the Rev. Ben Huelskamp, executive director of LOVEboldly, a nonprofit based in suburban Columbus that works on developing spaces where LGBTQ+ people can flourish in Christianity.

"As an organization, we support the idea of religious released time when it's done correctly and it benefits the widest range of students possible," he said. "But in this case, we're really seeing some troubling material come out of LifeWise and that's what we're in opposition to."

RELEASED-TIME EDUCATION

What neighboring states are doing

Laura Hancock *lhancock@cleveland.com*

COLUMBUS — Ohio's neighbors in all directions permit, to varying extents, students to leave school midday for religious instruction off-campus.

After the 1952 Supreme Court decision of Zorach v. Clauson, which found that it was generally constitutional for New York students to leave school midday to attend religious instruction, states have increasingly passed laws allowing or even mandating students be given the option to take "released time."

Ohio law states that local school boards can adopt policies allowing for released time religious instruction. A bill in the Ohio House would require all districts to adopt released time policies, which would make it easier for kids to leave campus for religious instruction. Ohio's neighbors have varying policies, according to research conducted by School Ministries, a Columbia, S.C.-based organization that helps launch released-time education courses.

State law in Michigan requires schools to allow released-time education with parental permission. *Advance Local*

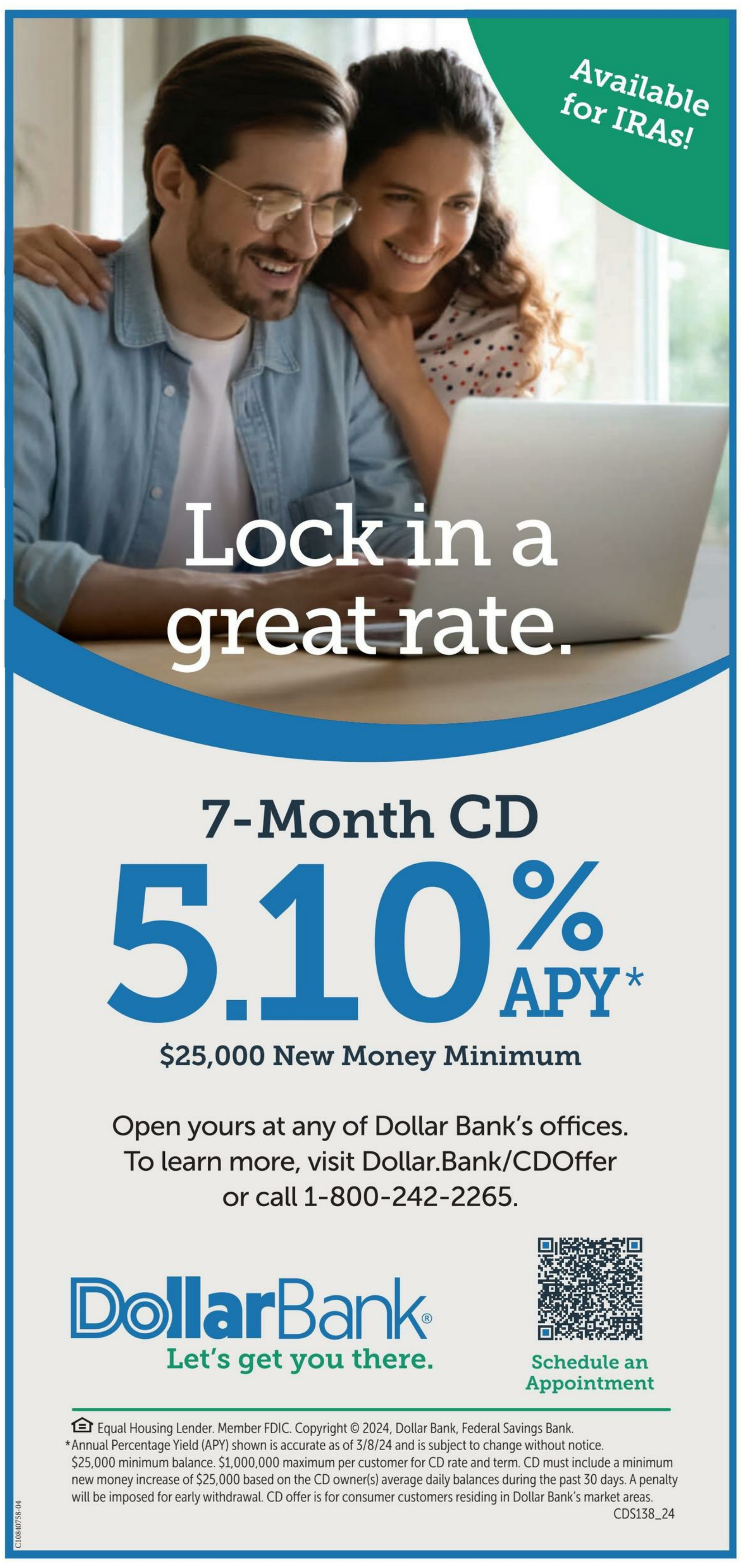
Michigan: State law says that children can leave public school to attend religious instruction classes for not more than two hours a week, upon the written request of the parent or guardian. This means that school districts must require released time.

Pennsylvania: State law requires superintendents to excuse students, upon written request of parents and guardians, from school attendance for up to 36 hours each school year to attend classes for religious instruction. The written request must describe the instruction and the dates and hours of the requested absence.

Indiana: State law says students can attend religious instruction for up to two hours a week if the parents seek permission in writing and the principal grants it. The principal's decision can be reviewed by the superintendent, giving local school boards discretion on whether to allow released time. Indiana administrative rules allow secondary schools to award academic credit to students in released time religious instruction if the local school board adopts a policy under which classes are evaluated purely on secular criteria, such as the number of hours of classroom time, a review of the course syllabus and course materials and whether the course is taught by a licensed teacher. Like Ohio, Indiana has a bill that would expand released time. Indiana's bill would require principals to OK requests for the religious instruction.

Kentucky: State law requires local school boards to allow students to be excused at least one hour each day. Another state law gives students credit "as if they had been in actual attendance in school." Students who do not participate in released time shall take noncredit enrichment courses not required in the regular curriculum, and those classes will also be counted as part of actual schoolwork.

West Virginia: As in Ohio law, each local school board gets the option of adopting a released time policy under state law. Parents and guardians must request in writing permission for release time in districts with such policies.



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